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ABSTRACT

Although student writers will accept evaluation more readily from their peers than from their instructors, beginning writers in particular hesitate to offer suggestions to another writer because they do not want to hurt their fellow students' feelings, and because they do not feel they know enough to evaluate someone else's work. The collaborative descriptive writing project works well in helping students overcome these fears and feel at ease with their classmates. As used in a developmental writing class, the project involves only a one paragraph paper, assigned early in the semester. Class discussion prior to the assignment concerns the use of concrete detail and a discussion of relative words that do not describe precisely, such as "tall." Students are then paired with other members of the class, and each pair is assigned to describe some location on the campus. Students visit the site separately, and record their visual, aural, olfactory, and affective observations on a sensory chart. The student pairs then collaborate on writing a piece of description about their assigned location, but without naming the place in the paper. They must agree on their dominant impressions and on the arrangement of the information. Through this process of coming to agreement, the students discover that suggestions and evaluations can be positive instead of merely negative. The pairs elect a reader who presents the paper to the class, and class guesses the location described. The assignment encompasses the various learning styles students bring to the class, teaches in a fairly painless way the importance of concrete specific detail and audience awareness, and allows students to become more comfortable with making suggestions to their peers about a piece of writing. (HTH)

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The Collaborative Description Paper

That student writers will accept evaluation more readily from their peers than from their instructors is a truism in the teaching of composition. But many students, particularly beginning writers, hesitate to offer suggestions to another writer for two major reasons: they don't want to hurt the feelings of their fellow students, and they don't feel they know enough to evaluate someone else's work. In order to overcome these fears and to help students feel at ease with their classmates, the collaborative descriptive writing project works well.

This project, as I use it in a developmental class, involves only a one-paragraph paper, although I see no reason that it could not be extended. It, therefore, occurs early in the term before students progress to longer pieces of writing. I have found it especially useful with students in basic writing classes who suffer from all kinds of writing anxieties because it frees them from being totally alone with a piece of writing--they at least have a partner to share in the praise or blame.

Class discussion prior to the assignment concerns the use of concrete detail and a discussion of relative words that really don't describe--such as the word tall. Students are usually amazed to find that for everyone in the class tall doesn't indicate the same height. In addition, students are introduced to the concept of a dominant impression and the advantages of including people engaged in activity in a piece of description rather than working with merely a static scene.

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Then they are given their project assignment. This project pairs the members of the class, assigning a topic to each pair of students. The topic will be some location on the college campus that the students must describe in a piece of writing. The students are to visit their assigned location and record their observations. This assignment works particularly well with new students who often are unfamiliar with the total campus. Not only do they gain a writing assignment, they also learn to find their way around their new environment. But the major benefit of the assignment is that it provides the beginning writer with the material for his paper. He has something definite to write about. Assignments will vary, of course, with the particular campus--possibilities include the check-out desk at the library (at least you get them into the library), the football practice field, the tennis courts, the track, the student cafeteria, a designated parking lot, the campus infirmary, or the campus post office. As a side-light, one pair of my students who received the post office assignment visited on our campus only the boxes where the students collect their mail--they never did discover that there was an actual post office where they could buy stamps and mail letters.

After the pairs have been given their assignments, they are asked to make a sensory chart on which to record their observations. For the idea of the sensory chart I'm indebted to Harvey Wiener and his book, The Writing Room. The chart consists simply of four ruled columns on a sheet of paper, with the columns labeled: What I Saw; What I Heard; What I Smelled; and What I Felt. Under each heading the students are to record 6-8 concrete sensory images to serve as material for their papers. In the

past I've sent the students in pairs to record their observations, but now I ask each student to go independently because I discovered that one of the pair often takes over and does all the observing for both. Also observations recorded at different times ought to yield more data for the paper and perhaps avoid the problem of those students who claim they visited their location but there wasn't anybody there doing anything at the time they went, and at this stage they're not comfortable reporting anything but the absolute truth. In addition, two visits will force the pair to make decisions about which material is more relevant to their description.

After the students have collected their observations, they then collaborate on writing a piece of description about their assigned location but without naming the place in the paper. They must agree on their dominant impression and on the arrangement of the information. All differences must be resolved, for only <u>one</u> paper is to result from the assignment. They are also responsible for agreeing on sentence structure, mechanics, and diction. It is through this process of coming to agreement that they discover suggestions and evaluations can be positive instead of merely negative. Even though only one paper is to be presented for evaluation, I ask for a copy from each student in his own handwriting in order to insure that both students take equal responsibility for the assignment. I insist that both copies must agree in all respects. In practice, however, the papers seldom agree in every detail. But from these variations, the instructor can determine much about a student's blind spots in transcription by noting omitted verb endings, dropped s's,

overlooked apostrophes, neglected capitals, etc.

On the day the papers are turned in, one person from each pair is selected as the reader (the selection being made by the pair themselves). The reader then presents the paper to the class to see whether or not the other class members can identify the subject of the paper from the description given. I might add that guessing the subject has never been a problem--even the paper on the mail boxes instead of the post office didn't confuse the students, only the instructor.

Another advantage of the assignment is that it incompasses the various learning styles that our students bring to the class, as described by Dr. Bernice McCarthy in The 4MAT System. As far as I can determine from my limited exposure to cognitive psychology, this project does encompass all 4. It is both active and reflective, making use of concrete experience and abstract conceptualization (the dominant impression). There are tasks to do as well as material to think about and the reading of the final paragraph to the class allows them to realize that writing is done for an audience.

What's more, the class enjoys the project. When the locations for the assignment are made, I write them on a slip of paper and give each pair its so-called "secret" assignment. There's much whispered planning that takes place so that other class members won't discover the location until the day the papers are read in class.

This assignment teaches in a fairly painless way the importance of concrete specific detail as well as the importance of audience since the

papers are presented to the class. But its most important benefit is that it allows students to become more comfortable with making suggestions to their peers about a piece of writing.